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PETER BOGDANOVICH

An Interview with Sidney Lumet

Lumet was a child actor on Broadway, appearing in such plays as MY HEART'S IN THE HIGHLANDS, DEAD END, and THE ETERNAL ROAD.

After the Army, he did some off-Broadway directing, then in 1950 moved to television, where he has directed hundreds of shows, including such two-part "spectaculars" as ALL THE KING'S MEN and THE SACCO-VANZETTI CASE. On the New York stage he has directed Shaw's THE DOCTOR'S DILEMMA, Arch Oboler's NIGHT OF THE AUK, and Camus' CALIGULA. His four films, which have all been made on the East Coast, are TWELVE ANGRY MEN (1957), STAGE STRUCK (1958), THAT KIND OF WOMAN (1959), and THE FUGITIVE KIND (1960).

Lumet is one of a group of young directors trained in television and stage work (Mann and Ritt are two others) who have been looked upon as likely to bring a new directness and sophistication to film. While the contributions of these men have not measured up to early expectations, their attitude toward film remains an interesting one. The following interview has been somewhat abridged for publication.

Could you say something about the problems of making FUGITIVE KIND?

They were always the original ones that came up in rehearsal or in the initial discussion of the script which we were all aware of—Tennessee [Williams], Anna [Magnani], myself, Marlon [Brando]—which was that the boy's character disappeared over the last half of the picture. This was true of the play [*Orpheus Descending*] as well. And constantly the problem was how to activate him, how to make him a driving force in the picture, because it is *Orpheus Descending*, and it's very hard to do *Orpheus Descending* without Orpheus.

Wasn't there anything Williams could do about that?

He wanted to. His problem was that he started off wanting a play about Orpheus, and

dramatically it's always a fuller thing for him to write a woman protagonist—his great parts have been women's parts. Whatever solutions I'd come up with would not work for Tennessee, and you can't force a situation, you know, it has to fit organically into what he had in mind and into what flows easily for him to write. And that we never found, and to me it's the failing of the picture. I love the picture, I think it's got some remarkable things in it and some of his most beautiful writing. And thematically it's, to me, the finest of his pieces—thematically. I'm not talking about the dramatic completion of it.

Do you rehearse extensively before you start shooting?

Yes, I like to rehearse a minimum of two weeks before I shoot. Now that was another problem—Anna has never rehearsed, she's never



done a play. I like to stage it before I start shooting, and it was physically impossible for her to work with a table that was supposed to be a counter, with two chairs supposed to be a door—she literally could not visualize a set. The sheer theatrical process is an alien one to her, so as a result some of the subsequent problems that came up normally would have come up in rehearsal.

You have directed extensively on television; what are the biggest differences you found between directing for films and television?

Scale. It's the difference between working on a 21-inch canvas and a 75-foot canvas, and that's a tremendous difference. That doesn't mean that there aren't things that can work in both—there's a certain level of drama that works in everything—but directorially it's a shift in the eye; it's a shift in the instruments, the tools

Photographer Boris Kaufman (with cigar) and director Sidney Lumet shooting with Marlon Brando in THE FUGITIVE KIND.

that you use to focus dramatic attention and so on. And it's also a difference internally—for instance, I've seen some Shakespeare on TV and it's been disastrous. I wonder if the sheer physical size of the screen isn't something that automatically rules out tragedy, for example. In other words, maybe TV is irrevocably stuck with drama, melodrama—one may never be able to do genuine tragedy on TV.

Then you must be against the showing of movies on television.

Yeah, it's incredible. It's one of the reasons I don't think pay-TV is going to be the panacea that the Hollywood people think it's going to be. Take a picture like *Red River*—now, I

know, nonsense story-line—it's a superb film. Cinematically it's an extraordinary piece of work. And what [Howard] Hawks did in terms of the reality of a cattle drive, it's, to me, on the level with what [John] Ford did with *Stagecoach*. But you see it on television and it's just shots of cows going by—it's pointless, it's meaningless, it seems as if it's overlong, its majesty is lost.

Now what are the differences you found in directing for the stage and movies?

To begin with, they're even farther apart than television and motion pictures. To me, far more things can be interchanged between television and motion pictures than between theater and motion pictures. The theater, for all its attempts at realism for the past thirty years, is a totally unreal medium—its essence is really poetic rather than literal. The screen *can* become poetic but, God knows, the majority of the good work has been devoted to literal and realistic, representational art. So it's an enormous difference—the difference between poetry and prose.

What have you found to be your main obstacle in film work?

For myself the main obstacle is the set-up, the film in America. The financial set-up, the method of making motion pictures, and the method of distribution is one that *conspires* to defeat freedom and good work. And I suppose it's the age-old complaint, there's no solution that I know of. I know every once in a while somebody just takes a camera and goes off into the street, but what if you had a piece that doesn't belong in the street? What if your piece needs a sumptuousness and a sensuousness as part of its dramatic meaning? And, you know, documentaries and semi-documentaries are not the only method of work in film. And as soon as you get past that level, financially you're caught in a miserable situation. *Twelve Angry Men* cost \$343,000, which is ridiculously cheap, but that's a rarity; it had one set, twelve actors, and a very tight shooting schedule of twenty days.

Many fine directors—Huston, Wilder, Bergman, Welles, Kubrick—either write their own

screenplays or collaborate extensively with others on scripts. To date you haven't done either; do you think you'd find it more satisfying to work on scripts rather than just do the best you can with material you are given?

It's not "either/or." I *can't* write. And I have such respect for writers—I don't understand how two writers collaborate, for instance—so that the method for myself is one simply of letting them do their work, then going *back* into work in terms of whatever specifics are needed, whether it's structural or dialogue. On *Fugitive Kind*, for instance, there was a good deal of re-writing between the original draft and what wound up on the screen.

Did you have a say in that?

Oh, yeah. And the working procedure was that Tennessee and Meade [Roberts] brought in the first draft, then all of us together talk, talk, talk, talk—back, another draft, talk, talk, talk, talk—back, another draft—I think it was the fourth draft we used.

Boris Kaufman was your photographer on every film except STAGE STRUCK; how large do you feel is his contribution when an evaluation of the final work is made?

Well, Boris is a rarity, because there are loads of brilliant technical people—and he is brilliant technically—but his real artistry comes through in the fact that I don't know of another cameraman who has the sense of dramatic interpretation that Boris has. When Boris and I have worked together there's never been any instance where we haven't done something outrageously new—though they don't jump out at you in the films, thank God. The camera becomes *another* leading actor. There are two basic philosophies—and traps—that I think directors fall into: one of well-just-let-me-lay-back-and-just-show-what's-going-on, just-let-me-record-it, or the converse, the shooting-through-the-crotch, and gimme-that-eyeball-being-in-the-front school. They are both fallacious because the camera—like everything else in a piece—has to relate to what's going on dramatically. You have to cast your camera the way you cast an actor.

Many critics either eulogize the death of Hollywood or constantly refer to the great



From the opening sequence of
THE FUGITIVE KIND.

citement—certainly in terms of literature and painting—Los Angeles never.

They're isolated in Hollywood, in other words.

Yeah, I feel that in order to get some sunlight they went to a completely dead spot. And it's interesting because all the directors that I respect have gotten away from there as fast as they could. Zinnemann hasn't made a picture in Hollywood I don't think in five years, Gadge [Elia Kazan] hasn't made a picture in Hollywood in seven years. [George] Stevens has, and I think it's showing in the work.

How would you explain then the great films that have been made in Hollywood, say in the 'twenties and 'thirties?

When you hire the most talented people alive—literally—assembled from all over the world, to work there, of course you're gonna have some good ones. And also good work is possible *any* place. I don't mean that Hollywood kills work, I just think it makes it tougher to do good work.

Now that the autocracy of the major studios is over, do you think the independents have raised the level of films in America?

No, because basically they're the same guys who just didn't have a chance when the studios were tight and strong. With all due respect and affection for United Artists, they're not risking a bloody thing; you still come into UA with a star versus a budget. And it is basically the same procedure at Metro. [Sam] Spiegel, every once in a while—because he'll produce a winner like *River Kwai*—is allowed to try something off-beat. But he knows full well that he has to keep returning financial winners. I know I'm very pressured by this. I hope *Fugitive Kind* makes a lot of money because none of my pictures have made a lot of money and I *need* one. I know my employment will be directly affected by it. So it isn't really independent production—nobody gets together and says, "Hey, lets make a movie about . . ." What's basically happened, I feel, is that because of financial reasons the actors have begun to dominate the market completely, and that's a good move only because as long as it's a roulette game I'd just as soon see the people who are actually spinning the wheel get the largest share of the

dearth of talent out there. What do you think are the reasons for the cultural desert on the West Coast?

This is gonna sound spooky—I think it goes back much farther than Hollywood. That place has no reason for being. It seems to me—as far as I know—I'm not the most erudite person in the world—but all the great centers of art have been centers of *other* things. They've either been a geographical center of the country or they've been a seaport—whether it's been Venice, Florence, Rome, London, Paris, New York, Berlin—they've had other functions; the life of the place has been connected to the main stream of life of that nation, of those people, and art came as a flower of that. Now, Los Angeles [laugh], I'm sorry, it's not a seaport, it's lousy land for farming, it's got no reason for being. Right now it's got aircraft factories, and maybe in 500 years aircraft factories'll be a reason for having a city. But up till now there hasn't been. It seems to me that it's extremely difficult for any creative work to latch itself on to an unorganic place. I think it's interesting that San Francisco's always had the artistic ex-

dough. I don't think it's accomplished anything creatively. I think most of the actors who kept saying, "Oh, God, if I ever have my own independent company, boy, will I do good stuff . . ." have turned out the same crap that Louis B. Mayer used to do—only not as well.

Do you think there is a cinematic movement in America coming to compete with the French "New Wave"?

No, I don't. I hate to be pessimistic, I don't at all. Reggie Rose and I've been trying for a year and a half to get done a piece that he wrote, a brilliant piece called *Black Monday*, which is the story of a Southern town on the first day of integration of schools. And we're just not gonna get it done, it's that simple. Out of the very nature of the subject matter, it's gotta be big. The financial problem is getting extremely severe now in terms of getting money to do a picture. I think, by the way, that in five years it's going to be absolutely marvelous, because we're going to have financing the way plays are financed: a bunch of people get together, put up money, and you rise or fall with the quality of the piece.

What do you think are the advantages or disadvantages of wide screen, CinemaScope, stereophonic sound, and the like?

I think they're ridiculous, I think they're pointless, I think they're typical Hollywood products. And typical Hollywood mentality, because the essence of *any* dramatic piece is people, and it is symptomatic that Hollywood finds a way of photographing people directly opposite to the way people are built. CinemaScope makes no sense until people are fatter than they are taller.

Why then do serious directors like Kazan or Stevens choose to work in CinemaScope?

They don't choose, there's no choice. When Stevens does a picture for 20th Century-Fox he has to shoot in CinemaScope. On *Anne Frank*, he fought for six months trying not to shoot it in CinemaScope and then had to. Spent all his time with the art director trying to figure out beams and girders to cut down the sides of the screen, and how to isolate what he wanted.

What film-makers, if any, have most influenced your work in movies?

I don't think any. I have great respect for about, I guess, seven or eight directors—Jean Vigo, Carl Dreyer, René Clair, De Sica, Wyler, Zinnemann.

Having been an actor, what do you think a stage performer finds most difficult in adjusting to pictures?

Probably the toughest problem is for him to keep a knowledge of the point of development or the point of transition that his character is at because of the out-of-sequence problem and the working in small sections. So that the growth, the tiny motivating rivulets that go into the big stream of the entire character, tend to get lost and he tends to become general and act attitudes, because his concentration is scattered and he doesn't quite know where he's at. It's one of the reasons I like the rehearsal procedure so, because it gives him a very clear idea of the sweep of the man. On every picture except *Fugitive Kind* the last four days of rehearsal were run-throughs just like a play or a television show.

Do you think the recent loosening of the Production Code has really helped Hollywood films toward attaining greater maturity?

Oh, no, they're just exploiting it for box office. William Wyler's films have always been mature whether he could say "bastard" on the screen or not. You know, it's like CinemaScope. They're using it so that they can start putting on the screen some of the things they've got in the ads.

Almost every director is occasionally exposed to withering critiques of his work, and it would be interesting to know what a director would answer, what he thinks when he reads such a notice.

There's just nothing you can do because you're talking from such completely different frames of reference, you know, you just gotta let it go. And some of the greatest significances as well as some of the greatest attacks are attributed to complete accidents. On *All the King's Men* I read a review which loved the show and which called me a genius because in the first scene when Willie Stark was on his way

up, talking to the people, I'd shot reactions of the crowd in the stand, the wildness of the faces and so on—and then in the second part, which came on a week later, when he'd been in power for six years, he was making an outdoor address and I played it in the rain with umbrellas—visually it was quite exciting—and how wasn't this marvelous that on his way up he was related to the people and looking them in the eye, and here he was now like standing over their graves and they're covered with umbrellas. The reason for it was very simple—I used up all the money for extras on the first show and on the second show I needed a crowd of fifty and I could only afford twenty people so I gave them umbrellas which spread everybody out [laugh]. So, go figure.

Complete freedom granted, would you rather work in films, television, or the theater?

I never want to give up any one of them. I guess I'd spend the majority of time in the

movies simply because it takes the longest. I mean, to me the ideal set-up would be a picture a year, a play a year, and about three months of television a year—because each one gives you such a shaking-up for the other, they all help one another *because* the problems are so totally different.

Joseph Mankiewicz has been quoted as saying that he fails to see any basic difference between the theater and the movies; what would you say to that?

Well, I don't agree. He should do a play again and see.

What do you think leads a director to say a thing like that?

I haven't the remotest idea. People say strange things in interviews, myself included. I'm always horrified by them when I read them back.

Marlon Brando,
Anna Magnani
(out of focus in
center) and
Sidney Lumet—
during the
shooting of *THE
FUGITIVE KIND*.
[Photo: Sam Shaw]

